

“Summer Flowering Shrub Maintenance for a Season of Color”

Early June sees the end of color provided by the spring flowering shrubs, but the start of blooming by the summer flowering shrubs. Species within this group, represented by such well known plants as crape myrtle, hibiscus, rose, althea, oleander and cassia, can flower most of the summer if properly maintained.

Unlike azaleas and other spring flowering shrubs that bloom on buds formed the previous year, the summer bloomers flower on new growth. Cultural practices such as irrigation, fertilization, weeding and mulching therefore have an almost immediate impact on the amount of flowering.

Most have made their spring flush of growth and have set their first set of flower buds. This stage of the plants' development requires a lot of energy, so make sure to prevent any stress, especially moisture stress, during this period. Established plants should receive a thorough watering twice per week in the absence of adequate rainfall.

Remove old flowers as soon as they fade in order to encourage regrowth and continuous blooms. Flowering is, of course, part of the reproductive stage of higher plants. If old flowers are left on, much energy goes into the development of seed and physiologically signals the plant that its job is done for the year. To the gardener this means fewer flowers during the remainder of the season.

Some supplemental fertilization serves to keep flowering shrubs vigorous. Crapemyrtle, hibiscus and most other woody ornamentals benefit from a spring and midsummer application of a complete fertilizer containing a slow release form of nitrogen. Roses benefit from more frequent, light applications and many successful local growers clip old flowers and fertilize after each flush of bloom is completed.

All of the summer bloomers benefit from mulches. Maintain a 2 to 3 inch layer of bark, pine needles or similar organic materials on the soil surface beneath plants. Mulches help to moderate soil temperatures, conserve moisture and suppress weeds. Even free standing specimens in the lawn do better when mulch is used. Instead of allowing grass to grow beneath plants, keep the area free of turf and use mulch instead. This practice not only provides a better environment for the root system, but lessens the possibility of mechanical injury from string trimmers and mowers.

Inspect summer flowering shrubs weekly in order to monitor pests. Some species require little spraying, but there are exceptions. Outbreaks of insects such as caterpillars and aphids can occur, as can diseases such as mildews and leaf spots. Early detection is the key to control. Roses require a preventative disease program through regular applications of fungicides in order to control black spot and other leaf diseases.

Question of the Week: My gardenias are flowering, but they have become overgrown and don't have a desirable shape. When is the best time to prune them?

Answer: Prune as soon as they have finished flowering. This will be sometime in mid to late June. Don't delay more than a few weeks because gardenias will need time to make summer growth and initiate buds before fall. Avoid any heavy pruning during the fall, winter or early spring. The removal of an occasional unsightly branch or excessively vigorous shoot can be done any time that it occurs.